Lessons from abroad: Whatever happened to pedagogy?

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers attempts to import pedagogic practices from other educational systems. In so doing, it focuses upon policymakers' attempts to a) import interactive whole class teaching approaches to the U.K. (and, to a lesser extent, the U.S.) and b) export learner-centred pedagogies, largely derived from Anglo-American theorising and practice, to industrialised and developing countries that often vary greatly in educational performance. The paper explains why such initiatives have largely proven ineffective, yet notes that while U.K. policymakers have largely moved away from pedagogic concerns to issues of teacher quality and expectation, learner-centred approaches continue to be proferred as a solution to the educational problems of many traditional societies.. Finally, the paper concludes by emphasising student academic motivation and engagement, rather than specific pedagogic practices, as key to the differential performance of industrialised countries in international comparisons,

Introduction

In the second half of 2013, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported comparative findings of the educational performance of 16 to 24 year olds in 24 nations. Young adults in England were found to rank 22nd in literacy and 21st for numeracy. The highest performing countries for numeracy were Netherlands, Finland and Japan, and for literacy, Finland, Japan and South Korea. Despite frequent criticisms of the methods and procedures employed in large-scale assessments of this kind (Goldstein, 2004; Prais, 2003, 2007; Roth et al., 2006; Gaber et al., 2012), and the problems of reducing complex datasets to simplistic aggregated rankings (Wrigley, 2004) the OECD findings confirmed the long-standing superiority of Finland and South East Asian countries across multiple international comparative studies of literacy and numeracy.

As has typically been the case for such analyses, the findings were met with no little anguish [the so-called PISA 'shock' phenomenon (Wiseman, 2013)] by policymakers in those countries where modest standings in the league table were held to be unacceptable. Once again, commentators looked to countries at the top of the league tables to provide clues as to where problems in their own countries lay and to indicate what could be done to improve performance. Although, in the U.K., poor classroom practice was once again held up as the primary culprit, there was now little suggestion that this related to particular forms of pedagogy. No longer was the main solution to inferior U.K. performance seen to be the importation of whole class teaching as practised in high achieving countries [the supposed 'miracle' cure of the 1990s (Alexander 2012a)]. Instead, the focus shifted away from pedagogy towards other educational policy-related features of high-performing countries such as Finland, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, China (Shanghai), and South Korea.

It is perhaps, something of an irony that while the US and UK have looked to Asian societies for pedagogic inspiration, the learner-centred forms of pedagogy, criticised as one reason for poor Western performance have continued to be admired by many reformers in high performing countries, while attempts export such practices to cultures in the developing world (Vavrus, Thomas, & Bartlett, 2011) have persisted, despite consistently disappointing results (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Learning from others

There is a long tradition of educationalists looking overseas to 'reference societies' in order to learn and borrow effective practices (Alexander, 2000; Phillips and Och, 2004) and justify and legitimate the desire for reform (Waldow, 2012). At the end of the nineteenth century the major European nations, concerned about their military and industrial competitiveness, cast anxious eyes at one another's education systems. During the Cold War, the launch of Sputnik in 1957 resulted in apprehensive examination as to whether the Soviet system of education was superior, with a seminal

text by Bronfenbrenner (1970) extending Western angst to issues of wider childhood socialisation practices. Concern by American policymakers that educational standards were lagging behind those of other nations, and that the performance of current American students was, for the first time, inferior to that of previous generations, later found expression in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This Report stated that the educational foundations of the United States were being '…eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our future as a Nation and a people…..If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (p.5). Shortly after its publication, a U.S. Presidential visit to Japan, at a time when the Japanese economy was buoyant, resulted in political fascination with its education and what could lessons be learned (Rappleye, 2012).

Anxiety in the U.S. about poor national performance was fuelled by a series of studies consistently showing significantly higher academic achievement in a number of Asian countries (Song and Ginsburg (1987; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Stevenson, and Lee, 1990; Stigler, Lee & Stevenson, 1990). Similar concerns were being voiced in England, fuelled by the results of a series of international comparisons undertaken by the International Association for the Study of Educational Achievement (I.E.A.) and a rival group, Educational Testing Services' International Assessment of Educational Progress (I.A.E.P.). Particularly influential at this time were the Second International Assessments of Mathematics (IAEPM2) and Science (IAEPS2) (Foxman, 1992). The performance of children aged nine and thirteen was compared across twenty countries. As for other studies, children from China, Korea and Taiwan were the highest achievers, significantly ahead of children from England and the United States.

Despite deserved criticism of the methodological flaws of these studies this mounting body of findings was similarly gaining the attention of U.K. policymakers. Calling for change, Barber (1996), the Head of

the Department for Education and Employment's Standards and Effectiveness Unit stated that, irrespective of the methodological weaknesses of individual studies, the results were so consistent that we, "…would be living in a fool's paradise if we chose to ignore the results" (p.24). In 1996, the Office for Standards in Education commissioned a *Review of International Surveys involving England between 1964 and 1990* (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996). The ensuing report examined the I.E.A. and I.E.A.P. studies, together with other smaller-scale comparisons and concluded that the performance of English children, in mathematics and science was poor and had deteriorated relative to other nations. As was the case for Japan in the 1980s, these findings became associated with the perceived threat of competing economic powers.

In attempting to explain why these countries were seemingly outperforming children in England, Reynolds & Farrell (1996) clustered reasons under four headings: cultural, systemic, school and classroom factors. Key cultural factors were the high status of the teacher, the emphasis on working hard, high parental aspirations, the academic quality of teachers, and high levels of student commitment. Important systemic factors were greater time in school, with more and longer school days, a prevalent belief that all children are able to succeed, and concentration on a small number of attainment goals, most of which were academic in content. For factors relating to the school, the Report's authors highlighted the strong emphasis upon whole class collaborative and supportive group processes, the use of specialist teachers, free time for lesson planning and teacher collaboration, and close monitoring by regular testing and scrutiny from the school Principal. At the level of the classroom, the key factor identified was the use of whole class interactive teaching whereby the teacher's and students' joint task was to ensure that all members of the class kept up with the material together and that the range of achievement was minimised. Tight lesson timings ensured that attention was maximally focused. Widespread use of textbooks was held to be a valuable means to minimise the need for teachers to construct their own materials.

Shortly after the publication of Reynolds' report, the first results of the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), involving 500,000 students in forty one countries, reached the front pages of the world's newspapers. English children scored significantly poorer in mathematics than their counterparts in several Pacific Rim and Eastern European countries. Indeed, while their performance was similar to that of children in Germany and Denmark, it was significantly lower than those in Austria, Belgium, Sweden, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. While performance of English children in science was equal or better to most of Western Europe, it was still inferior to Pacific Rim and some East European countries. In the US, it was noted that the relative performance of American students declined as they progressed through the school years By the end of their time in high school (12^{th} grade), US students were among the lowest from 21 participating nations in both mathematics and science with only Cyprus and South Africa scoring significantly worse. Examination of the most able 10-20% of students in mathematics and physics (16 participating nations) proved particularly unsettling as, in both subjects, the US students were outperformed by every other country.

The political and educational fall-out from the TIMSS findings dovetailed with Reynolds & Farrell's (1996) call for changed patterns of teaching. High profile attacks were made upon child-centred approaches with particular complaint that the emphasis upon individualisation and differentiation were leading to underachievement. Critics suggested that providing each child with material designed to their own particular needs, and operating at a pace that varied according to their own level, only served to increase differences between children and this inevitably resulted in a large tail of underachievers. In contrast, high performing countries, such as the heavily cited Taiwan, encouraged practices that ensured that the range of achievement was kept to a minimum. Here, a strong emphasis upon group cohesion and cooperation appeared to be

important, as was the general willingness of students to engage in additional work outside of the classroom.

Drawing upon observations in highly successful Pacific Rim countries, and studies of practice in Switzerland (Bierhoff, 1996; Bierhoff & Prais, 1995), Reynolds and Farrell (1996) argued for an increase in whole-class teaching,

> "…not simply of the 'lecture to the class' variety, but high quality *interactive* teaching in which the teacher starts with a problem and develops solutions and concepts through a series of graded questions addressed to the whole class" (p. 56, emphasis as in original).

Such an approach was held to be different from traditional whole class teaching which had:

> "....become associated with too much teacher talk and too many passive, tuned-out students.…..whole-class instruction in Japanese and Chinese classrooms is a very lively, engaging enterprise. Asian teachers do not spend large amounts of time lecturing. They present interesting problems; they pose provocative questions; they probe and guide. The students work hard, generating multiple approaches to a solution, explaining the rationale behind their methods, and making good use of wrong answers" (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992, pp. 146-147).

The call for the introduction of successful practices from abroad was taken up enthusiastically by the then Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Wales (Woodhead, 1996) who argued that

50% of primary school lesson time (60% in the case of mathematics) should take the form of whole class teaching. In a highly-publicised initiative, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, sought to model its primary school mathematics teaching on practices observed in Switzerland and Germany (Luxton & Last, 1997). This involved far greater emphasis upon whole-class instruction in which the use of overhead projectors and oral discussion featured prominently.

Similar procedures were advocated in secondary schools. Drawing upon the Hungarian mathematics teaching, Burghes (1996) established a widely publicised intervention that was taken up in a variety of U.K. schools. The approach emphasised the need for greater clarity, precision and focus in teaching mathematical concepts, the value of examining student errors as illustrations for class learning, the use of homework as a central component of learning, and greater emphasis upon whole class, interactive teaching. Mathematics teaching was also under the spotlight in the US and, in a widely publicised initiative, Stigler & Herbert (1999) compared mathematics teaching approaches and argued for the adoption of Japanese teaching practices. However, as Heyneman & Lee (2014) point out, a key factor, not brought into their analysis, was the widespread attendance of Japanese children at private tutoring schools (*juku)* where much of the preparatory work for university entrance examination was covered. As a result, Japanese teachers in state schools may be freed from the more pedestrian activities that encumber their peers in countries such as the U.S.

Beyond pedagogy: Factors associated with high achieving countries.

It is notable that while classroom pedagogy in successful Asian countries has been a dominant concern of UK policymakers, local commentators in these countries have tended to focus upon other factors to account for their achievements. Thus, in accounting for the high performance of

Singapore in international assessments Ng (2013), lists five key factors: the existence of a Government-led common goal for education with close monitoring of standards, financial investment geared to educational improvement, high status for the teaching profession offering prestige and attractive salaries, strong home support resulting in high levels of study out of school hours, and a sense of safety in the school environment. For South Korea, Shin (2013) identifies the importance of high levels of achievement motivation, fuelled both by the Confucian value placed upon scholarship and more instrumental career concerns, the proportion of time spent studying each week, and parental expectations and involvement. This latter factor has been emphasised as contributing towards a high degree of "educational zeal" (Sorensen, 1994, p.21) with parents spending considerable time selecting and monitoring private tutoring for their children (Bray, 2010; Park, Byun, & Kim, 2011). As Sorenson points out, the academic success of South Korean students is less a matter of curriculum, pedagogy or structural factors such as class size than the result of how education is embedded within the fabric of Korean society. Interestingly, one important pedagogic element, the general absence of differentiated instruction in South Korea (Sung, 2006), an approach that was perceived by Reynolds & Farrell, (1996) to be a weakness in England, is held by Shin (2013) to be a reason for Korean underperformance.

A similar picture to Korea is provided for Taiwan (Liu, 2013). Here, the key factors are seen to be the value placed upon education success that finds expression through the use of supplementary education - after class guidance, additional tutoring and private "cram schools" (Liu, 2009, 2011). Out of school tuition not only helps to drive up overall standards, it also enables struggling learners to catch up with their peers - thus reducing achievement gaps within class groups (Ma, Jong, & Yuan, 2013). In a telling echo of Stigler and Herbert's U.S/Japanese comparison (1999), the key role of out of school activity was also downplayed in Reynolds' much publicised "*Panorama*" BBC television documentary (1996) where the high levels of

Taiwanese performance in mathematics were attributed to whole class teaching and the concomitant lack of individualised teaching through differentiation (Reynolds, 2010).

Shanghai, a top performer in PISA 2009, has recently gained much attention as a new reference society for educational policy (Sellar & Lingard, 2013). Once again, cultural factors leading to high academic achievement have been identified as key - a powerful work ethic underpinned by Confucian principles, parental pressure (that also operates within low socio-economic status families) and a fiercely competitive system that examination system (Tan, 2013). Others, however, have also highlighted policy initiatives that have sought to improve the quality of teaching and learning and address the problem of low performing schools (Cheng, 2011).

During the past decade, the attention of policymakers has embraced a country with greater cultural similarity to other Western nations and one that has achieved a premier position in the PISA surveys of 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009. While the performance of Finnish children in earlier assessments by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) was unremarkable (Sahlberg 2007), it was the rather different nature of the PISA assessments, emphasising the application of knowledge and skills to real-life situations, that appears to have led to Finland's premier position in reading, science and mathematics international league tables.

This performance has resulted in policymakers and practitioners flocking to Finland from around the world in search of the key to success. Many factors have been suggested - a high level of preschool education, sound support for children with special educational needs, high levels of educational and welfare expenditure, a small immigrant population, and relatively low influence of socioeconomic status on student performance. Another factor, echoing the Asian picture, is the high regard for education that permeates Finnish society. As a result, the profession is able to

recruit high quality student teachers who receive a lengthy and academically rigorous training (Chung & Crossley, 2013).

In many ways, Finland has bucked the trend of most industrialised countries by resisting the emphasis upon formally measured national standards and teacher and school accountability (Sahlberg, 2007) In line with the valuing of the teacher, commentaries upon Finnish teaching quality tend to emphasise the important role of teacher expertise in making decisions about practice. Professional understandings are underpinned by a strong focus upon research-based thinking and practice (Silander and Välijärvi, 2013).

According to Chung & Crossley (2013) a particular strength of the Finnish system is its individualised provision for children with special educational needs. Such a strength appears to run counter to Reynolds and Farrell's (1996) recommendations for more whole class teaching and their claims that individualised approaches are, in part, to blame for the comparatively poor academic performance of children in England.

Why did imported pedagogies not take root?

There are two key reasons why the preoccupation with imported pedagogy declined and such practices were rarely sustained. Firstly, the warnings of Sadler, voiced in 1900, of the folly of cross-cultural educational cherrypicking have become more widely understood. Secondly, the principal reason why Asian countries are at the top of international league tables is that children in these countries are typically work harder in and out of school.

i) Pedagogic practice and the culture of schooling

For some, identifying effective practices that will operate in any school system is a relatively simple empirical task; for others, such a belief is unrealistic. In discussing these opposing schools of thought, Fuller and Clarke (1994) identified camps with very different understandings

about how schools work. One group, the 'policy mechanics' are associated with a neo-positive perspective in which controlled studies are advocated as a means to derive generalizable claims about reality. In respect of educational practices, their goal is to empirically isolate discrete teaching and wider school practices that are found to be universally associated with student achievement. Such information is of great interest both to national governments and to supra-national organisations who wish to identify elements of school and classroom effectiveness. This approach has thrived within a broader policy climate in which evidence-based approaches indicating "What works" became de rigeur for politicians and policymakers across education, health and social services (Oakley, 2002; Wiseman, 2010) It is unsurprising, therefore, that education researchers in this tradition became the gurus of policy-makers, "….the academic community's jet-setting, high-tec, intellectual sharp dressers" (Alexander, 1996, p.6).

In contrast, the 'classroom culturalists', situated within a contextualist paradigm, reject any notion that educational practices can be considered independently of the culture in which they are situated. Rather, they emphasise a focus on the "…implicitly modelled norms exercised in the classroom and how children are socialised to accept particular rules of participation and authority, linguistic norms, orientations towards achievement, and conceptions of merit and status" (Fuller and Clarke, op.cit., p.119). For those who hold such a position, attempts to derive culture-free conceptions of educational inputs (class size, level of teacher education, pedagogic practice) considered to have consistent, universal effects upon achievement are naïve and unlikely to generate meaningful understandings.

One powerful contextualist theory is that developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, (1979, 2005) although it is important to note that context is just but one element of his process-person-context-time model. Particularly important in the theory are proximal processes - consistent and enduring forms of interaction between developing individuals and the people, objects and symbols that feature in the people's experience. Proximal processes are influenced by personal

characteristics and the multiple spatial and temporal contexts in which these interactions occur. Contextual levels include the macrosystem, which may refer to a given society or region, microsystems, such as school or home (which are influenced by the macrosystem), and the chronosystem which concerns the impact of historical time on entire societies (and also the microsystems that operate within them) as major political, economic and social changes confront traditional values, beliefs and practices.

The policy mechanics can be criticised for ignoring many of these components. Proximal processes of interaction in many Asian settings are underpinned by deep respect for the importance of the educational process, for the knowledge and authority of teachers, for the demonstration of personal qualities of persistence and diligence, and for the priority placed upon the needs of the group over those of the individual. Such elements are likely to be important for the operation of interactive whole-class teaching, an approach that will require a child to participate even at those times when the group activity is overly or insufficiently demanding for them. As collaborating participants in the learning process, class members need to respond to halting performance from struggling peers in ways that do not humiliate, alienate or deter Such demands require a capacity to attend and concentrate for lengthy periods of time, a strong commitment to the group, and high standards of behaviour and self-discipline. Contrast, this with Anglo-American classrooms, particularly those marked by socioeconomic disadvantage or where there are high levels of variability in pupil attainment (Prais, 1997). Here, the self-discipline necessary for coping with the lengthy passage of whole group interaction may routinely be lacking, and there will often be little desire to support the learning of peers who can be perceived as a competitors, stressors, or harassers (Li, 2012). Novice teachers, particularly in schools serving less affluent districts, may learn that it is often unproductive to try to draw out extended classroom discussion and rumination as this can too readily lead to restlessness, unruliness and disengagement. As Alexander (2012b) notes, one of the greatest hurdles to

introducing a greater proportion of high-level dialogue to classrooms is the fear of teachers that this will make them more likely to lose control. Where student behaviour is a challenge, teachers will tend to favour forms of pedagogy that help them maximise task engagement and restrict student rowdiness. Oftentimes, this will involve a succession of short activities in which written, individual work forms a significant component.

The influence of the peer group is key to the operation of certain forms of pedagogy and here significant macrosystem and microsystem influences impact upon proximal processes. In examining patterns of interaction in classrooms, Elliott et al. (1999, 2001, 2005), for example, compared the role of peers in Russia with those in England and the US. Since the pioneering work of Makarenko in in the 1920s, socialisation practices in the Soviet Union have built upon the important role of the collective. From the age of three, most children were involved in group activities in which they were taught to recognise and respect the interests and needs of the group and defer to the authority of the adult (Tudge,1991; Markowitz, 2000). This continued through the primary school years where children were taught to directly influence one another in ways that reflected the goals of the society. As Bronfenbrenner (1970) noted, the peer group championed 'desirable' behaviour, within a culture in which students were encouraged to take personal initiative and responsibility for encouraging appropriate behaviour from their peers .

Elliott and colleagues (1999, 2001, 2005) noted that these traditions had persevered after the end of the Soviet period and Russian students continued to influence their classmates in ways that aided engagement and discipline in lessons. Academic enthusiasm and achievement were openly admired by peers as long as these were unencumbered by any signs of arrogance and able students were prepared to help those who were less accomplished. In contrast, peer influences in England and the US often militate against the outward show of enthusiasm for academic study to the extent that some students deliberately seek to underperform or, at least, conceal high grades from their peers (see also, Li, 2012, pp. 187, for a discussion of differing peer influences upon

educational striving in Western and East Asian cultures). However, without a strong climate of peer support, respect for teachers, and the presence of strong student self-discipline, any attempt to establish significant levels of whole class interactive teaching is doomed

Educational borrowing has not travelled in solely one direction, however. Policymakers, researchers and education reformers operating in traditional (both industrialised and developing) societies have also sought to import pedagogic practices from the UK and US. Such initiatives have been largely influenced by the primacy of Western (particularly American) educational and psychological theorising (American Psychological Association, 1997), that emphasises the importance of individual wellbeing [for example, self-determination theory, Ryan & Deci, 2000)] and a variety of democratic/emancipatory (Tabulawa, 2003) agendas rather than the results of international comparative testing programmes. Such practices can be described as component elements of learner-centred education, a somewhat generic term that is not easily encapsulated in a simple set of descriptors (Schweisfurth, 2013) but which emphasises a view of knowledge as fluid rather than fixed, a diminution of teacher didacticism and authority in favour of democratic, student led (often collaborative) learning, and a focus upon individual student interests and needs. According to academic work from the field of educational psychology, approaches based on such principles should result in greater levels of motivation and personal agency, higher quality learning and retention, and greater capacity for critical thought and an ability to apply knowledge meaningfully and imaginatively (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Despite the league table standing of countries that are historically associated with learner-centred approaches, several high-achieving Confucian countries consider these to be a means of improving their students' creative, problem-solving and entrepreneurial performance (Ng, 2008). Initiatives have not met with universal approval in these societies, however. Zhao (2005), for example, criticises the obsession of East Asian reformers with perceived American strengths - the production of happy, creative and socially responsible students - that and the concomitant

belief that Western approaches will help their own societies.. Li (2012) notes that while learning from the content of Western education has proven helpful to China, accepting the associated learner-centred modes of teaching and learning has proven far more difficult. She cautions that unless managed carefully, the introduction of such approaches may have a deleterious effect upon relationships between children and their parents, teachers and peers and, in the light of this questions:

> "Why keep trying to change something that has failed to change for 150 years? Or perhaps the question ought to be posed in a different way: Is it worth the effort? And to what end?... I think it is time for them to stop and ponder" (Li, 2012, p. 341).

However, according to Bronfenbrenner's theory, one would anticipate change not only at the level of the macrosystem (as a result of modernising influences) but also on the part of the developing individuals (the students) who are not mere passive recipients of social forces but also instigators. Changes in everyday practices do not occur solely because of changes at the level of culture or society but, in part, because of the experiences and personal characteristics of new generations. Despite the slow pace of change over the past 150 years it is conceivable, therefore, that longstanding proximal processes at home and at school will prove difficult to maintain indefinitely.

In this respect, Elliott & Tudge (2007) have described how globalising influences emphasising the importance of individual freedoms and autonomy led to calls for the importation of a range of Western approaches into hitherto academically successful Russian classrooms. Here, rather more than has been the case in East Asian societies, traditional teacher-dominated approaches, associated with the nation's Soviet past, were vilified by reformers as outdated and inefficient for modern industrialised societies (Polyzoi & Dneprov, 2003). However, and as is noted above,

far-reaching changes at the macrosystemic level are unlikely to be speedily translated into changes in proximal processes (e.g. classroom practices), especially where these have developed over many years. Thus, despite the initial attraction of Western approaches to teaching and learning to many Russian teachers, the power of longstanding proximal processes was such that early enthusiasms soon faltered and many teachers rapidly reverted to their former practices (Froumin, 2005), much to the chagrin of many of their students who, in the long term, will surely exert a degree of influence upon future practices (Elliott & Tudge, 2007; Elliott, 2013).

Problems are even greater in the developing world where the literature on the implementation of learner-centred approaches, "....can make depressing study" (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 154). The reasons for this are manifold with resource constraints, low teacher expertise, limited epistemological understanding, and high staff turnover, all factors which are held to have consistently undermined attempts to change pedagogic practice (Chisholm, 2012; Jessop & Penny, 1998; Schweisfurth, 2013). The problem of resources, both material and human, is very real and the failure of initiatives is often seen to stem from inadequate and insufficient training (Altinyelken, 2010; Vavrus, 2009; Hardman et al., 2009). Training, often conducted by those with missionary zeal (as seems to have been the case in Russia) can result in the expression of voiced support by the trained (teachers) for new pedagogic practices, yet long-standing practices can continue in much the same fashion (Barrett, 2008; Schweisfurth, 2013). Crucially, there can be insufficient regard to issues of philosophy, values and belief, and the ways by which these undermine the efforts of those who seek to introduce the new practices. For many, comparatively poorly educated teachers in the developing world, traditional forms of teaching and learning locate them as authority figures in possession of important knowledge that they can transmit to their respectful students (Coe, 2005). Approaches in which knowledge is fluid, and where teachers are perceived as facilitators or co-constructors, rather than the purveyors, of knowledge may challenge their professional identity. As the present author has noted in his own work in

Lesotho, the introduction of cross-age peer tutoring (a practice that would seemingly sit well within the Basotho cultural tradition in which older children routinely guide their younger siblings) may leave teachers feeling side-lined and uncomfortable about their status.

Even before commencing their schooling, children in traditional societies are typically subject to socialisation practices that predispose them to learn passively and unquestioningly [although see, Li & Wegerif (in press) for a more nuanced account of the dynamics of education based on Confucian principles]. As the influence of globalising forces leads to challenges to traditional relationships and greater student desire for individual autonomy (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2011), there appears to be a desire on the part of some sectors in traditional societies that school should act as an important counter-balance for the maintenance of social order and discipline. In such situations, the introduction of Western learner-centred approaches is unlikely to flourish, at least in the short term (Peterson del Mar, 2013).

In her examination of learner-centred initiatives in the developing world that seem to have proven effective, Schweisfurth (2013) notes the central importance of sustained and coherent support for teachers by means of ongoing professional development. This begs the question as to whether supportive practices can be established that will persist once the additional input is removed or when the approach is upscaled beyond a narrow range of institutions. The problem of sustaining initiatives is equally evident for industrialised nations. Thus, many of the highly publicised initiatives that followed the call for whole-class interactive teaching in the U.K. and U.S. in the 1990s have faded away as first enthusiasms declined and 'hero-innovators' (Georgiades & Philimore, 1975) moved elsewhere. Even the mandatory teaching approaches of the literacy and numeracy strategies, established in the wake of advocacy for whole class teaching by the Reynolds & Farrell (1996) report, were finally shelved in 2010. No doubt, their demise was, in part, a consequence of the finding that standards of literacy and numeracy had failed to improve despite earlier claims to this effect (Tymms, 2004).

ii) levels of academic motivation and engagement.

There is a well-know anecdote of a man searching for his car keys under a street lamp. When asked whether he is sure that he had dropped them nearby, he replied that he had lost them elsewhere but, "This is where the light is showing". In many respects, policymakers will typically fasten onto particular aspects of education systems that they can readily and speedily influence while underplaying more intransigent or challenging factors [for example, the important role of social inequality in educational underperformance (Alexander, 2012a; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009)]. By adopting a pick 'n mix approach to policy borrowing (Morris, 2012), factors that do not sit comfortably with governmental strategy may be conveniently ignored [two examples being the highly centralized nature of Japanese education that was anathema to the Reagan administration in the 1980s (Rappleye, 2012) and a disregarding of the absence of high-stakes testing in modern day Finland]. Furthermore, a form of projection can operate whereby some policy makers [see, for example, the influence of media accounts of the many virtues of Finnish education (Takayama, Waldow, & Sung) 2013)], can identify features of high achieving countries that, in actuality, do not exist (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Takayama, 2010; Waldow, 2010).

It is hardly surprising that while describing the strong drive for educational success in the Pacific Rim countries, Reynolds followed the publication of his report (Reynolds & Farrell (1996) by high-profile calls emphasising the need for pedagogic reform. Such calls, offering little challenge to politicians, were eagerly embraced by influential members of Government and the leaders of the national Inspectorate However, as noted above, pedagogy cannot be divorced from student behaviour and discipline, and these latter factors are underpinned by powerful underlying social, economic, historical and cultural factors (Coffield, 2012).

However, even if pedagogy could be imported in the fashion prescribed, it is unlikely to make significant inroads in overall levels of performance. In industrialised nations, if rather less so perhaps, in the developing world, the overwhelming reason for comparative international test success is the engagement of students in the educational process. As Elliott et al. (2005) note, the reason why Russian (previously Soviet) children have long been comparatively high academic performers, despite significant social and economic challenges, is because they operate in a culture that expects them to work harder and longer on schoolwork than many children in the West, often at significant cost to their physical and psychological wellbeing (Baranov, 1998). Underpinning these efforts was a strong societal belief in the importance of being 'an educated person' who would be widely admired by other children and adults. Such a perspective is rarely found in Anglo-American contexts where education tends to be perceived as having a more instrumental value that may not appear accessible to disadvantaged groups.

It is important to emphasise that anti-intellectual attitudes in the U.S. (Grant & Sleeter, 1996; Sedlak et al., 1986) do not spring from the schools in isolation but, rather, grow out of socialising experiences in the wider communities which they serve (Coleman, 1961). In a critique of American attitudes to education, Steinberg (1996) reports large-scale parental disengagement from schooling in which acceptance of poor grades is widespread, peer culture is often scornful of academic excellence, and student lifestyles in which a high proportion of time outside of school is spent socialising, engaging in leisure pursuits and/or in part-time employment. Steinberg is scornful of the claims of school reformers which, too often in his opinion, have underplayed the importance of motivational factors:

> No curricular overhaul, no instructional innovation, no change in school organisation, no toughening of standards, no rethinking of teacher training or compensation will succeed if students do not come to school interested in, and committed to, learning" (p. 194).

Learner-centred approaches, where these operate ineffectively, may further undermine levels of engagement. In place of concerted striving, an implicit bargain (Sedlak et al, 1986) may be struck where low-levels demands are made characterised by:

> …relatively little concern for academic content; a willingness to tolerate, if not encourage, diversion from the specified knowledge to be presented or discussed; the substitution of genial banter and conversation for concentrated academic exercises; improvisational instructional adaptation to student preference for or indifference towards specific subject matter or pedagogical techniques; the 'negotiation' of class content, assignments, and standards; and a high degree of teacher autonomy in managing the level of academic engagement, personal interaction, and course content" (p.7).

Closely allied with a strong desire to work hard is disciplinary climate (i.e. an orderly classroom environment), a factor deemed to be even more important in explaining high levels of achievement in East Asian countries than the extensive time spent on academic learning out of school hours (Ma, et al., 2013). Contrary to the impression that is sometimes given in media accounts, however, student behaviour and relationships with teachers are not wholly a consequence of teacher management skill and the influence of school climate but also reflect more deeply culturally held attitudes and beliefs about the nature of authority and personal freedoms (Pace & Hemmings, 2007).

In many traditional societies, there are fears that adult authority and student acceptance of teacher legitimacy are being eroded by Western (globalising) influences. Where such pressures occur, teachers are often likely to struggle. Alexander (2000), for example, has reflected upon the tensions resulting from American teachers' professional beliefs (reflecting those embedded in U.S. society), as to the importance of student autonomy and empowerment, and their need to

ensure disciplined, hardworking classrooms. He describes in powerful terms how such beliefs, and the classroom interactions and practices that reflected these, led to teacher-student negotiation, confrontation and, ultimately, reduced time on-task. In contrast, his observations of Russian classrooms in the 1990s, confirmed those reported by other Western visitors (Elliott et al., 2005; Hufton & Elliott, 2000; Glowka, 1995; Muckle, 1988, 1990). that the high standards of behaviour routinely observed were closely associated with consensual understandings about the nature of knowledge, the authority of teachers, and respect for the educational process.

It can be questioned whether gaining top positions in international league tables such as PISA necessarily indicates superior performance across a broader curriculum and whether, if a more subjects were included, the same countries would still occupy the lead positions (Alexander, 2012a; Heyneman, 2013). Alexander (2012a) also questions whether an ultra-competitive desire to beat other nations is desirable, given the major social and environmental challenges that confront us. The present author would like to pose one more: Even if the league tables do present a valid picture of high educational performance that has important societal value, to what extent is it appropriate to ask our children to make the extensive sacrifices that would be needed? Are the emotional and physical problems that result from the pressures of an unrelenting workload (e.g. in the Soviet Union, Baranov, 1998; or in some East Asian countries, Stankov, 2010) an acceptable price to pay for such an outcome? It is likely that then answers to these questions might vary greatly between countries.

Conclusions

Calls to introduce cherry-picked pedagogic practices from other countries have now become, less vociferous and the belief in such 'miracle cures' appears not to figure highly on the agendas of policymakers or the influential organisations that advise them. Indeed, the influential McKinsey Report entitled *How the World's Best Performing Systems Come Out on Top,* (Barber

& Mourshed, 2007) chose not to focus on pedagogy on the highly questionable grounds that this was already well-debated in the literature.

Rather than having been influenced by the persuasive arguments of those who emphasise the importance of contextual factors, this shift is most likely a consequence of the demonstrated ineffectiveness of simplistic policy borrowing. Notwithstanding this, the 'neocolonial export' (Nguyen, et al., 2009a) of Western learner-centred pedagogies to developing societies continues apace despite a length litany of ineffective or unsustained educational outcomes.

Of course, it would be folly to ignore good practice, wherever it is located, and national education systems have always borrowed aspects of practice from each other. However, where this has proven effective, it is because significant elements are shaped and incorporated within models of practice that are appropriate for the host culture. Thus, having noted the seeming paradox that collaborative group practices, seemingly well-suited for collectivist societies, have taken stronger root in individualistic cultures, Nguyen, et al. (2009a, b) outline some of the ways by which specific elements of the approach reflect a Western, rather than an Asian, perspective. To enable collaborative group approaches to take root in Asian schools and colleges, it is necessary to modify various aspects in ways that reflect sensitively to the host culture.

Saddler (1900) observed that the things outside the classroom matter more than those inside the schools, and these "....govern and interpret the things inside" (p. 50). Unfortunately, governments have too often sought to focus on discrete aspects of schooling and ignored findings such as those demonstrating that socio-economic difference is the single strongest factor in relation to academic performance on PISA (OECD, 2001, 2004). Once one strips out broader , but important, explanatory factors such as poverty, economic inequality, racism, health, and social dislocation and alienation, to focus more narrowly upon the specifics of school-related

activity, the primary factor that explains high academic success is the degree of student engagement (driven by learner demand), not the operation of particular pedagogies. In order demonstrate this, one only needs to examine the remarkable educational performance of Asian-American students in the U.S. (Eaton & Dembo, 1997; Siu, 1992) - the somewhat controversially termed 'model minority'- to see how high levels of achievement motivation and academic engagement impact upon educational performance in classrooms that are typically less successful with other students. In this respect Heyneman (1999, 2013) refers to the importance of student 'demand to learn', "....a culturally shaped attitude or disposition that places the value of education higher or lower on a scale of socially desirable activities" (2013, pp. 284-285) and which is demonstrably greater in Eastern Asia than England and the U.S.

Of course, pedagogy and student motivation and engagement are inextricably related and cannot be easily dissociated, with the importance of high teacher knowledge and skills crucial to both. However, to assume that one can import a given set of practices from a seemingly more successful country to one that is less so and rapidly reap educational rewards is a folly that is only now becoming widely understood. In the UK, as in the US, the key problem is fundamentally motivational: how can we encourage large swathes of our school population to engage more fully in the educational process. Given the high levels of social and economic inequalities in these countries, and the impact these factors have upon educational performance (Condron, 2011), longstanding Anglo-American attitudes about the attainability and value of academic excellence are likely to continue to prove motivationally problematic for many. At least we now understand that importing pedagogy from overseas is not a quick means to circumvent such challenges.

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